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Prospects for Soviet Intervention in Iran* (U)

Recent indications that the Soviets are raising the combat readiness of some military units on the border with Iran and the precedent of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan have raised the specter of a possible Soviet military move against Iran. A number of possible motivations for military intervention can be advanced including: a reaction to any earlier US intervention; a desire to seize control of the oilfields; and the installation of a pro-Soviet government in Tehran. (C)

The Soviets will carefully weigh the serious risks of such an intervention. They would run the clear danger of confrontation with the United States, which has announced that this area is of vital interest to it, and they would further damage their relations with a host of countries worldwide, most importantly in Europe and the Middle East. They also would face the long-term prospect of trying to maintain a military presence in a large country with a well-armed population that would certainly be hostile to the Soviet presence. (C)

The USSR's decision to upgrade its forces certainly reflects concern about potential instability in Iran and conveys a determination to be ready for any contingency. The apparent increase in combat preparedness will, at a minimum, put the USSR in a better position to put pressure on Iran and will act as a disincentive to intervention by the United States. But the USSR's increased preparedness in the area also puts it in a stronger position to pursue broader objectives. Possible Soviet motivations to take military action in pursuit of those objectives, as well as the risks involved, are examined below. (C)

*This article is a contribution to a planned Intelligence Assessment of the same title that is being drafted by the Office of Strategic Research. (U)

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History of Soviet Interventions in Iran

The Soviets and their Czarist predecessors have a long history of intervention in northern Iran. In this century, the Soviets occupied parts of the area twice in response to what they perceived as threats to Soviet security. In May 1920 Soviet forces occupied Gilan--the most northern province of Persia--in an attempt to drive out British forces that had been supporting resistance to the new Soviet regime. An independent Soviet Republic of Gilan was proclaimed. In early 1921, however, Soviet policy toward Asia evolved from the active promotion of revolution to collaboration with the national governments. As a result, the Soviets withdrew their forces in September 1921, and the Republic of Gilan collapsed the following month when Persian forces moved in. (U)

In the early stages of World War II, Iran attempted to maintain its neutrality. By 1941, however, the Allies were seriously concerned with increasing German influence, and in August British and Soviet forces occupied southern and northern Iran respectively, thus securing a corridor to the Persian Gulf as an important supply line to the USSR. (U)

An Anglo-Soviet agreement in 1942 set the terms for the Soviet and British presence in Iran during the war and called for a mutual withdrawal six months after the war ended. The British left on schedule (by 1 March 1946), but Soviet troops remained and were subsequently reinforced. (U)

With Soviet support, the Azarbayjan Democratic Republic (ADR) was formed in late 1945. Heavy pressure by the United States and the United Kingdom applied through the United Nations compelled the Soviet troops to withdraw in May 1946. The ADR collapsed completely in December of that year when Iranian troops reentered Azarbayjan on the pretext of supervising national elections. (U)

The 1921 Treaty

The Soviets invoked the 1921 Russian-Persian Treaty to justify their World War II occupation of Iran, and they

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would undoubtedly cite it again if they elected to intervene militarily. Article six of that agreement gives the USSR the right to introduce troops into Iran under a broad set of circumstances that Moscow would interpret to its advantage as the situation evolved. It states that, should a third party try to carry out a policy of usurpation through armed intervention in Persia or should it seek to use Persian territory as a base of operations against Russia--and if the Persian Government is not able to stop such action after having once been called upon by Russia to do so--Russia has the right to move troops into Persia to carry out military operations. The article provides, however, that Russia will withdraw such troops when the danger is removed. Article five of the treaty commits both sides to prevent the presence on their territory of forces or organizations that might be regarded as a menace to the other contracting party. (U)

In early November 1979, immediately after the seizure of the US Embassy in Tehran, the Bazargan government announced Iran's unilateral abrogation of articles five and six. Although Bazargan's government fell the next day, other Iranian officials subsequently endorsed the abrogation. The Soviets have not formally responded to the Iranian action, but they have insisted in private that they do not accept Iran's unilateral abrogation and that the treaty remains valid. (C)

The Soviets' refusal to recognize Iran's abrogation of the operative articles of the 1921 treaty gives them a rationale should they choose to intervene militarily in Iran. Any US military action in Iran could obviously be cited by the Soviets as justification for their own intervention under the terms of the treaty. A less clear cut justification would involve invoking the treaty provision concerning the use of Persian territory by a third party as a base of operations against Russia or even Afghanistan. Some current Soviet propaganda could be viewed as laying the groundwork for such an invocation. A 25 January Izvestiya article, for example, charged the United States with encouraging separatist movements in Iran with the clear objective of weakening the central authority and sowing disunity in order to promote a US comeback in the region. Should the USSR decide it needed such justification, it is only a short step from the

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above assertions to the charge that separatist movements, backed by the United States, pose a threat to the USSR's security. (U)

The 1921 treaty, while providing the Soviets a framework for intervention, is also explicit in stating that any such intervention will be temporary. The Soviets do not claim any Iranian territory as their own, and the two historical precedents include eventual, if grudging, withdrawals. (U)

Possible Soviet Motivations for Military Intervention

The following scenarios examining possible motivations for a Soviet military intervention in Iran range from reaction to US military action to a unilateral Soviet operation designed to seize some or all of Iran. The discussion is not intended to suggest that the Soviets are seriously contemplating any of these actions; indeed we believe that, at this time, the Soviets probably think the political costs and military risks of military intervention in Iran outweigh the possible gains. This is particularly true at a time when the future political orientation of Iran still could turn in their favor. (C)

Reaction to US Military Action

The most compelling motivation for Soviet military intervention would be prior US military action against Iran. The Soviets are anxious to prevent the United States from regaining a position of dominance in Iran and would be particularly sensitive to the establishment of a US military presence on their border. With the seizure of the US Embassy in early November, the US military buildup in the Indian Ocean, and the US effort to establish a rapid deployment force in the region, Soviet concern about possible US intervention mounted in November and early December. While this concern has subsequently decreased, it has not completely disappeared. (C)

The Soviets' inclination to react to US military action would be lessened if they believed that such action was a limited operation designed solely to secure release of the hostages. Nonetheless, any US operation

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probably would prompt a Soviet response, possibly involving fleet movements and increased readiness activities designed to deter the United States from further steps. (C)

If the Soviets concluded that a US action had broad and permanent implications--such as occupation of southern Iran, seizure of the oilfields in Khuzestan, or establishment of a pro-US government--they would probably perceive that their own interests dictated a military reaction designed to prevent Iran from falling completely under US influence. (C)

Under such circumstances, the USSR's most likely response would be a move into northern Iran with the purpose of creating both a buffer zone and a basis to negotiate withdrawal of all foreign forces. Such a move could be justified under the terms of the 1921 treaty and is within current Soviet capabilities. In addition, by limiting the military objective to northern Iran, the Soviets would minimize the danger of direct confrontation with the United States. This is a danger that they undoubtedly take very seriously in the wake of the US declaration that the Persian Gulf is within the sphere of US vital interests. (C)

Internal Iranian Developments

Possible Fragmentation

The Soviets might persuade themselves of the need to take military action against Iran if the country appeared to be fragmenting. We know from Afghanistan that the specter of instability on its borders is deeply troubling to Moscow. Furthermore the Soviets are well aware that the symbolic leader of much of Azarbayjani dissidence, Ayatollah Shariat-Madari, is anti-Soviet and that an Iranian Azarbayjan under his aegis would not be friendly to the USSR. Moscow undoubtedly has grave reservations about an unfriendly Azarbayjan regime, possibly with proselytizing inclinations, on its border. On the other hand, Moscow thinks Iran's possible disintegration could be exploited in its favor. For example, some leftist, pro-Soviet groups have been active in Azarbayjan, and the Soviets undoubtedly hope that in the longer term such elements will dominate the region. (C)

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Should the Soviets decide that the level of instability in Iran warranted military intervention, they would have to determine the geographical confines of their operation and the nature of the anticipated US response. Once again, a move into northern Iran would be the most logical response since it would involve the lowest military effort and carry the lowest risk of a US military reaction. (C)

The Soviets would have to take into account the possibility of a US military response to any military move into Iran on their part--even a move limited to northern Iran. Certainly a Soviet decision to undertake such an operation would be far more likely if Soviet planners perceived a US disinclination to react. Their estimate of the likelihood of a US response, however, has probably increased in the wake of recent US assertions with respect to the Persian Gulf. If they felt a US countermove--either into southern Iran or Khuzestan--was a reasonable possibility, they would then have to decide if such a scenario involved a net gain or loss for them. It seems likely that they would conclude that it was undesirable in effect to invite the United States to establish a military presence in Iran, either in the south or in Khuzestan. Their own occupation of the north for the purpose of restoring order would not be sufficient gain to offset a US presence and would lead to tensions as Soviet and US forces faced each other. (C)

The Soviets might decide that their best option was a quick strike into Iran designed not only to occupy northern Iran but to seize as much of the country as possible, including Khuzestan. Such action would present the United States with a fait accompli and preempt an effective countermove. Such action would, of course, involve a major military effort, face probable Iranian resistance, entail grave risk of confrontation with the United States, and be perceived as a serious threat by Iraq, which has sizable military forces in the area. (C)

An Anti-Soviet Government

Soviet dissatisfaction with the central Iranian Government has been growing in recent weeks. The Soviets were stung by Iran's vote in the United Nations against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and were upset by

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Iran's attendance at the Islamabad Conference. They have been displeased with past statements by both President Bani-Sadr and Foreign Minister Qotbzadeh expressing concern about Soviet intentions toward Iran, and they must have been extremely dissatisfied with Bani-Sadr's landslide victory in the presidential elections. Finally, the Soviets have recently started to complain about Iranian support for the Afghan insurgents. The Soviet-supported National Voice of Iran, broadcasting from Baku on 28 January, charged that a number of training camps for Afghan insurgents had been established in Iran and accused some Iranian officials of siding with the "imperialists" against Afghanistan. The broadcast called on Iranian officials to reciprocate Afghan leader Babrak Karmal's pledge that he would never allow Afghanistan to become a base of activities against Iran. (C)

A Soviet intervention designed to replace a hostile regime in Tehran would require broader action than a move into northern Iran. Indeed, Soviet occupation of northern Iran or occupation of the Khuzestan oilfields would serve only to fuel anti-Soviet sentiment within the remainder of Iran. The Soviets would also have to assume a strong US counterresponse. Should the Soviets nevertheless decide on intervention under this scenario, their most viable military option would be a large-scale move into Iran designed to take control of the whole country. (C)

Request for Help From Pro-Soviet Government

If Iran's internal situation seriously deteriorates in the months ahead, a leftist, pro-Soviet government could come to power; it is then possible that it would request Soviet military support. In such a case, a large-scale Soviet operation would be the most appropriate action; a limited move might only serve to generate opposition to--rather than strengthen--the leftist government. Once again, Soviet estimates of the probable US response would be a key element in determining policy. (C)

Over the longer term, a viable leftist government in Tehran might seek a gradually increasing Soviet advisory presence. Such a development could produce an Afghan-type scenario in which the Soviets, already involved, face a deteriorating security situation that leads them to intervene on a large scale. (C)

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Unilateral Acquisitive Soviet Action

An argument can be made that the Soviets are ultimately motivated by their need for oil and that their goal is expansionist. There is little doubt that the USSR faces serious energy problems which will severely restrict its own and Eastern Europe's economic growth in the 1980s. Although they may not be convinced that these problems are as serious as we believe and although they probably have confidence in the USSR's long-term ability to cope with the situation, Soviet leaders are undoubtedly aware that they face energy problems in the 1980s. (C)

The USSR will be looking for new means to ensure the flow of energy to support its own economy and those of Eastern Europe, but the outlook is not encouraging. The spiraling price of oil will strongly motivate the USSR to seek oil at concessionary prices through arms sales, barter deals, and development assistance; with the exception of Libya, however, most countries belonging to the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries appear disinterested in this type of arrangement. (C)

While Moscow's Middle East strategy does not at this time appear to be driven by its energy problems, it is conceivable that an increasing dependence on OPEC sources for their oil supply will push the Soviets to adopt a stronger policy in the area. Soviet leaders certainly recognize that Iran's oil would go a long way toward alleviating economic problems facing the Soviet Union and its allies in the mid-1980s and late 1980s. (C)

A unilateral Soviet military thrust into Iran, designed primarily to occupy the Khuzestan oilfields is, therefore, conceivable. The Soviets, in taking such action, would do so despite their recognition of US interests in the Persian Gulf and the West's continued reliance on Iranian oil. They would thus be aware that they were running a high risk of confrontation with the United States. They certainly also know that Iraq itself has claims with respect to Khuzestan and would view such action as a threat to itself. Finally, they would have to anticipate Iranian nationalist insurgency against the vulnerable oilfields. It seems unlikely, therefore, that, the Soviets are now seriously planning such a venture. (C)

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The Soviets might believe that occupation of northern Iran, the occupation that is most feasible militarily and involves the lowest risk of confrontation with the United States, would provide a stepping stone toward the oilfields. Once established there they could await another opportunity to move against Khuzestan. It is possible that Moscow might think the time is ripe for such a first-stage move, since the USSR is already bearing the onus for its invasion of Afghanistan and the United States is only beginning the process of improving its capability to respond. On the other hand, the Soviets may believe that they have their hands full at present in Afghanistan and that the US psychological willingness to respond is now unusually high. (C) (CONFIDENTIAL)

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